



ALEXANDER THE GREAT'S JOURNEYS
AND THE EXTENT OF HIS EMPIRE

CHAPTER ONE

PRECURSORS OF THE SILK ROAD

Alexander the Great

The life and achievements of Alexander the Great (r. 336–23 BC) preceded the establishment of the Silk Road by some three centuries but the route that he followed approximates in many places to the highways that merchants of later years would come to use. His empire was vast but its existence was fleeting: within twelve years of embarking upon his conquest of Asia he lay dead in Babylon and his satraps began, almost immediately, to rebel. At the time of his death Alexander's empire encompassed all of the lands between Greece and India and the many cities that he founded became pockets of Greek culture that continued to exert a profound influence long after his passing. He took with him an army of up to 40,000 men and the soldiers that he left behind to garrison these new cities married local women. Greek ideas began to permeate through the societies of the East: religion, politics, medicine and the arts were all strongly affected by Alexander's legacy and the foundations for the subsequent development of the Silk Road were firmly laid. After Alexander's time it could never again be said that the Orient and Occident were two separate, unconnected worlds. A fully developed network of trade routes between Europe and Asia does not appear to have been in place until the first century BC but, in the years after Alexander's death, exotic goods are known to have reached the west in significant quantities. Ivory, spices and unusual pets (parrots and peacocks were especially prized) are all recorded among the possessions of the wealthy citizenry of ancient Athens.

Chinese Legend

The Travels of Emperor Mu, written around the third century BC, describe the exploits of King Mu of the Western Zhou dynasty (1050–771 BC). Emperor Mu is thought to have lived in around 1000 BC and the journeys ascribed to him are a mixture of legend and fact:

'Emperor Mu wished to satisfy his ambition by touring around the world and by marking the countries under the sky with the wheels of his chariots and the hoofs of his horses.'

(From a commentary on 'Classic of Spring and Autumn', quoted in Franck and Brownstone, 1986)



Fig. 4 **Marble head of Alexander the Great**
Hellenistic period, first half of the 2nd century BC
H. 42 cm
From Pergamon (Bergama), Izmir province, Turkey
(Archeological Museum, Istanbul)

Emperor Mu is said to have departed from China through the Yumenguan (the Jade Gate) with an army and travelled in a jade-inlaid gold carriage to the lands of Central Asia. Legend has it that, after crossing the desert of the Taklamakan, he reached first the Pamirs and then journeyed through the Kunlun Mountains on the northern edge of the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau, the domain of Xi Wang Mu, the Queen Mother of the West (see p. 82). After presenting her with lavish gifts of jade and silk – the earliest mention of the precious commodity as tribute – he turned homeward, stopping en route to hunt. But Mu's exploits are legend. There are tantalising clues that the authors knew of the people of the Western Regions and had knowledge of their customs but the evidence is inconclusive. The only solid data for early Chinese contacts with the lands beyond its borders comes from studies of nomads and the processes of trade and tribute along what came to be known as the 'Steppe Route.'

CHAPTER TWO

NOMADS

*'Sworn to sweep out the Huns
without regard for my own safety:
Five thousand sable hats and silk coats
Were lost in the border dust.
I grieve for those crumbling bones
scattered along the river bank of Wuding,
They are still in the hearts of lovers
Who dream of them in inner chambers.'*

(Chen Tao [9th century], 'March on Western Lun', from Z. C. Tang, 1969. Western Lun, or Lung-Hsi was an outpost in Gansu)

The Steppe Route

It is important to make brief mention here of what some scholars have termed the 'Steppe Route' and its relation to the Silk Road. The Steppe Route is not literally a route, since it does not follow a precise track in the way that the Silk Road does. Instead it covers a region as far west as the steppes of Southern Russia and the Danube, through the Kazakh Plain and Mongolia as far as the Great Wall of China. Nomadic equestrian tribes moved across the area in both directions in search of pasture for their cattle, horses and sheep, a practice that has been followed since Neolithic times. Because of their peripatetic lifestyle there are few remains of permanent settlements to be found and this makes identification of a precise route impossible. These nomadic groups (called *Hu* by the Chinese) conducted trade with neighbouring regions from a very early period, including the purchase of silks, bronze mirrors and weapons from China; furs and gold from Siberia; nephrite jade and wool from East Turkestan, and horses and wool from West Turkestan. The contents of *kurgans* (burial mounds) of the Scythian-Sakae period (sixth to fourth centuries BC), most notably at Pazyryk, show that contacts with the Chinese were taking place from an extremely early date. The Pazyryk mounds lie at a height of 1,600 metres above sea level in the Eastern part of the Altai, a range that begins 450 km south-east of Novosibirsk, and extends southwards through Kazakhstan, China and Mongolia. Among thousands of items unearthed at Pazyryk are Chinese bronze mirrors, woollen textiles that may come from Iraq, and a cream-coloured Chinese silk saddle cover, embroidered with phoenixes and birds (fig. 5).

By the time of the Western Han dynasty in China (206 BC–9 AD), there was a constant demand for Chinese silk, part of an essential barter process through which the

Chinese obtained horses. An early description of this trade by a Chinese official reflects a belief that the Han were simultaneously receiving tribute and impoverishing the nomads. They did not regard it as trade.

'A piece of Chinese plain silk can be exchanged with the Hsiung-nu [Xiongnu] for articles worth several pieces of gold and thereby reduce the resources of our enemy. Mules, donkeys and camels enter the frontier in unbroken lines; horses, dapples and bays and prancing mounts, come into our possession. The furs of sables, marmots, foxes and badgers, coloured rugs and decorated carpets fill the imperial treasury, while jade and auspicious stones, corals and crystals become national treasures.'

(Ascribed to the Lord Grand Secretary of the Han Council in 81 BC and quoted in Franck and Brownstone, 1986)

The Xiongnu peoples, the most powerful and bellicose of all the *Hu* tribes, first appear in Chinese annals during the late fourth century BC, and come from the region between the Yellow River and the Yingshan Mountains. The term Xiongnu is extremely derogatory, meaning something along the lines of 'slave bastard' and reflects the contempt with which the Chinese regarded the nomadic peoples along their northern frontier. Sima Qian's *Shiji* ('Records of the Historian')* gives a fascinating account of the Xiongnu. He states that they had no walled cities or fixed dwellings and wandered from place to place in search of water and pasture for their animals. They did not engage in agriculture and had no means of writing. Their strength as warriors derives from the practice of training boys to hunt with bow and arrow from an early age. During times of peace, the Xiongnu were content to herd their flocks but, in time of war, they lived by

* Sima Qian (c. 145–90 BC) was a descendant of the Qin family of nobles. Both he and his father, Sima Tan, held the post of Grand Historian and astrologer in the court of Emperor Wudi (r. 140–87 BC). He continued the work, begun by his father, of compiling a history of China and had unquestionably met many of the characters about whom he writes. Sima Qian travelled widely, including journeys to some of the new dominions of Wudi's expanded empire and appears to have read virtually all the extant Chinese literature, including documents in the Imperial archives. In 99 BC, Sima Qian's life took an appalling turn when an army led by the Chinese general Li Ning was defeated by the Xiongnu. Sima Qian attempted to defend Li Ning's capitulation to the nomads, but Wudi became enraged and ordered that he (Sima Qian) be arrested and sentenced to castration. He was subsequently rehabilitated and appointed to the post of palace secretary – a post open only to eunuchs, and this enabled Sima Qian to complete his history, *Shiji* ('Records of the Historian'). The *Shiji* is a huge work – 130 chapters and more than half a million characters – but is a veritable treasure trove of information about virtually every aspect of ancient Chinese history.

‘plundering and marauding’. He describes them as being without honour: ‘Their only concern is self-advantage, and they know nothing of propriety or righteousness’.

In recent years, historians have attempted to augment our knowledge of the Xiongnu and recent discoveries indicate that were a more highly developed society than Sima Qian’s annals would lead us to believe. By the Warring States period (475–221 BC), the *Hu* peoples had established a strong, cohesive and prosperous society that posed a major threat to China’s borders. The quality of their gold work suggests that the *Hu* had attained a high level of sophistication (fig. 6).

The Chinese adopted various methods to counter the threat from the *Hu*. Early Chinese accounts describe how, in 307 BC, King Wuling of Zhao State instructed his troops to adopt *Hu* dress and to change from a strategy of chariot warfare to one of fighting on horseback with bows. This enabled the Zhao to push back the *Hu* and to solidify their control of northern China by the mid-third century BC. Around 400 BC the Chinese had begun to erect an immense wall to keep out the nomads and the Zhao added sections of their own. The wall was strengthened and extended during the centuries that followed, most notably during the reign of Qin Shi Huangdi (r. 221–10 BC). During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the masonry and earth structure we know today as the Great Wall was completed.

Other strategies employed by the Chinese to contain the *Hu* included the payment of tribute and forging conjugal ties. By about 200 BC the Xiongnu were at the zenith of their power under the leadership of the chieftain (or *Shanyu*) Maodun. Maodun conquered the Ordos area to the south of the Yellow River as well as expanding his empire into Central Asia and defeating the *Yuezhi*, another of the *Hu* tribes. Attempts by the Chinese General Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty, to attack the Xiongnu almost ended in disaster when his forces were cut off and surrounded by Maodun’s army. A peace agreement was negotiated involving the payment of vast amounts of tribute in the form of silks and foodstuffs, a strategy that the Chinese continued to use for much of the Western Han dynasty (206 BC–9 AD). The Xiongnu Empire was formally recognized by the Han, who declared, according to Sima Qian, ‘Let the state holding the bows beyond the Great Wall follow the rules of the *Shanyu* and let the Han govern the state of overcoat and hat, which lies inside the Great Wall.’ Inscriptions on pottery architectural tiles unearthed at Baotou, Inner Mongolia, reveal the practice of exchanging marital ties in order to placate the Xiongnu (fig. 7).

Many of the Chinese women who were sent to marry nomads were extremely reluctant to go. A poem from around 107 BC describes the anguish of Liu Hsi-chun, a daughter of a disgraced prince of the Han ruling dynasty, sent to marry an ageing nomad chief:



Fig. 5 Felt saddle blanket (shabrak) covered with Chinese silk

Early nomadic culture, Scyth-Sakae, 6th to 4th century BC
L. 226 cm, W. 65 cm
Unearthed by S. I. Rudenko in 1949 at Pazyryk, Altai Region, Russia
(The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg)



Fig. 6 Gold headdress

Hu peoples
Warring States period (475–221 BC)
D. 16.5 cm

Discovered in 1973 at Aluchaideng in the Maowusu Desert, 40 km southeast of Hangjin Banner city, Ordos region of Inner Mongolia, China

(The Museum of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Hohhot)

This exquisite headdress consists of a skullcap with a depiction of four rams attacked by four wolves. The lower section is made up of three semicircular bands, each featuring a horse, a ram and a tiger with bared teeth. Atop the whole assemblage is an eagle with a head of turquoise. There is some disagreement as to whether the upper and lower parts of this object belong together.

Fig. 7 **Fragment of a gray architectural tile**

Western Han dynasty

(206 BC–9 AD)

D.15.5 cm

Unearthed from a tomb at the Zhaowan site in the suburbs of Baotou, Inner Mongolia

(The Museum of the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Hohhot)

A moulded inscription in Chinese reads, 'Conjugal amity with the *Shanyu*' and commemorates marital ties between the Chinese and the Xiongnu (whose leader is known as the *Shanyu*).



*'My family has married me
in this far corner of the world,
sent me to a strange land,
to the king of the Wu-sun.*

*A yurt is my chamber,
felt my walls,
flesh my only food,
kumiss to drink.*

*My thoughts are all of my homeland,
my heart aches within.*

*Oh to be the yellow crane
Winging home again!*

('Song of Sorrow', translated by Burton Watson in Watson, 1984)

It is quite clear from the excavation of burial mounds (known as *kurgans*), that the relationship between the Chinese and the Xiongnu was not merely adversarial, however. Excavations of the *kurgans* at the Noin-Ula site north of Ulan Bator in Mongolia, by Russian archeologists during the 1920s, reveal that there was a tremendous amount of

Fig. 8 **Lacquer bowl with Chinese inscription**

China, Han dynasty, dated 2 BC

From Noin-Ula, Mongolia

(Ulan Bator Museum)



interaction between the two groups. Fragments of bronze mirrors and lacquer bowls were discovered, all of Chinese manufacture, as well as a silk textile from Sichuan with tree and bird motifs. One of the lacquer bowls has a long inscription in Chinese which includes the date 2 BC and it seems likely that the site itself is of the same era (fig. 8).

Two large felt carpets were also found at Noin-Ula, decorated with the animal motifs common to the art of the steppes. Although the rugs appear to be of nomadic origin, one has a piece of Chinese silk sewn onto it (fig. 9).



Fig. 9 **Felt carpet with Chinese silk attached, depicting a gryphon attacking an elk**

Ca. 1st century AD

From Noin-Ula, Mongolia

(Ulan Bator Museum)

Zhang Qian

Despite their best efforts, Han strategies for pacifying the Xiongnu were ineffective and raiding continued unabated until the reign of Emperor Wudi (140–87 BC). Wudi's attempts to counter the Xiongnu threat were a pivotal event in the history and development of the Silk Road and are described at length by Sima Qian in *Records of the Historian*. After the death of the king of the Indo-Scythian Yuezhi peoples at the hands of the Xiongnu leader Maodun, they were driven westwards from the Gansu corridor to Bactria, in modern Afghanistan, where they eventually established the Kushan Empire (see chapter three). Emperor Wudi decided to send an envoy to the Yuezhi in the hope of persuading them to open a second front against the Xiongnu. He selected a palace courtier called Zhang Qian, together with a Xiongnu slave named Ganfu sent as interpreter. The expedition set out in 138 BC with over a hundred men. As it passed westwards through Xiongnu territory the party was taken hostage. Zhang was detained for more than ten years, taking a Xiongnu wife who bore him

a son, but he eventually escaped and continued his journey to Bactria. He was unable to convince the somewhat indolent Yuezhi king to form an alliance against the Xiongnu and, after a year as their guest, he started for home. On the way back to China, Zhang was again captured by the Xiongnu and spent a further year with them before escaping with his Xiongnu wife and the slave Ganfu. Of the hundred men in his party only Zhang Qian and Ganfu returned safely to China.

Zhang's report to Emperor Wudi is recorded in the annals of Sima Qian. He describes the regions to the west of China including those of Dayuan (Ferghana, between the Oxus and the Jaxartes Rivers in present-day Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), Daxia (Bactria) and Kangju (Transoxiana). He also related anecdotal information about more distant lands, describing 'a great shoreless lake' (probably the Caspian Sea), the Persian kingdom of Anxi (Parthia), where 'great birds lay eggs as big as pots' and the 'Western Sea' (possibly the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea). His descriptions of the land of Shendu (India) must have sounded outlandish to the Chinese:

'When I was in Daxia (Bactria)...I saw bamboo canes from Qiong and cloth made in the province of Shu' (Qiong and Shu are in the area of present day Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces in southwestern China). He continues, 'When I asked the people how they had gotten such articles, they replied, "Our merchants go to buy them in the markets of Shendu"... The region is said to be hot and damp. The inhabitants ride elephants when they go into battle. The kingdom is situated on a great river.'

Emperor Wudi immediately recognized an opportunity to increase trade with China's neighbours and to use that trade as an instrument of foreign policy to extend his dominions. Wudi was transfixed by accounts of the horses of Dayuan (Ferghana). Zhang Qian saw animals there that he described as having been foaled from those of heaven, and which sweated blood (probably the result of parasites). Wudi had consulted the oracle, the 'Book of Change', which warned that 'divine horses are due to appear from the northwest' and he believed the Ferghana animals to be the fulfilment of that prediction. Wudi's desire to acquire these horses may have been linked to his search for immortality and two poems (one quoted here) that survive from the Han dynasty were probably written to express the emperor's joy when he acquired some of them:

*'From Great Unity heaven-sent,
The horse of heaven comes down,
Soaked with crimson sweat,
Froth flowing russet.
His courage is superb,
His spirit marvellous.
He prances through floating clouds,
Darkly racing upwards.
His body free and easy
Leaps across a myriad leagues.
Now who is his equal?
Dragons are his friends.'*

(*The Horse of Heaven*, Anonymous, Han dynasty [206 BC–220 AD].
From Birrell, 1988)



Fig. 10 Wall painting of
Zhang Qian and his journey
to the realm of the Yuezhi
Tang dynasty (618–907)
Cave 323, Dunhuang, Gansu
province, China



Fig. 11 **Birch-bark saddle flap, painted with an image of a heavenly horse**
Korea, Silla period,
ca. 6th century
H. 53 cm, W. 75 cm
From the Chonma-chong Tomb,
Kyongju, Korea
(Kyongju National Museum)



Fig. 12 **Przewalski's Horses**
(Photographed in Mongolia by an
unknown photographer)

The idea of the heavenly horse and its connection with dragons became embedded in the Chinese psyche. The Tang dynasty poet Li Bai (also known as Li Po, 701–62) has immortalized the way in which these horses were revered by the Chinese:

*'The Horses of Heaven come out of the dens of the
Kushanas [Yuezhi],
Backs formed with tiger markings, bones made from
dragon wings.'*

The legend of the heavenly horse also spread eastwards along the Silk Road to the kingdoms to the east (fig. 11).

Heavenly horses are popularly believed to have been Arab stallions,* now long disappeared, and were far superior in strength and endurance to the small local breeds used by the Chinese. The Chinese used the wild tarpan of the Asian steppe, identified as *Przewalski's Horse*† (fig. 12).

* Recent genetic research suggests that Turcoman and Caspian horses, and not Arab breeds, may be ancestral to most, if not all forms of oriental horse (see p. 291).

† *Equus Przewalski* is the last species of wild horse, first identified by the Russian-Polish explorer Colonel Nikolai Przewalski in the Gobi desert in 1881. Attempts to breed this rare animal in zoos failed and, by 1977, there were only about 300 animals left. A Dutch foundation began a concerted campaign to save the horse and reintroduce it to the Mongolian steppe. The project appears to have been a success and, as of 1998, there were a total of about 1500 examples, both in the wild and in captivity.

Ferghana horses, if they could be obtained in sufficient numbers, might enable the Chinese to subjugate the Xiongnu and missions were sent out to secure them, resulting in further contacts with neighbouring states and the establishment of routes which came to be known as the Silk Road. 'Heavenly Horses' figure in the art of the period again and again, the most sublime example being the celebrated 'Flying Horse of Gansu', unearthed at Wuwei in 1969 (fig. 13).

Sima Qian relates that Wudi sent Wang Ranyu, Bo Shichang and other envoys to search for a new route to Bactria via India, through the 'barbarian regions' of southwest China. The bellicosity of these tribes is described at length by Sima Qian. One of the groups he describes – the Dian peoples of Yunnan – are referred to as riders of elephants who traded with neighbouring states. Dian bronzes show that they wore the trousers and short tunics of the equestrian nomads of Central Asia. They produced intricate works of art, although their fondness for warfare is sometimes reflected in their choice of motif (fig. 14).

Attempts to establish a route to Bactria were unsuccessful and the project was abandoned but the Chinese continued to make contact with their neighbours. Zhang Qian's last expedition was to visit the Wusun people, who lived in the Ili River Valley south of Lake Balkash in modern-day Kazakhstan, to seek allies against the Xiongnu and to secure more 'heavenly horses' in fulfilment of Wudi's augury. Horses from Dayuan (Ferghana) were found to be even more robust than those supplied by the Wusun and Chinese trade with both states increased to the point where the Han began to construct fortifications along the route to protect travellers. By the time of Zhang Qian's death in 113 BC, he

had become one of the most senior ministers of Wudi's court with the title of Grand Messenger. Sima Qian describes the return of envoys that Zhang Qian had dispatched to the kingdoms of Central Asia and the importance of this process to the development of China's relations with neighbouring countries. His words are a fitting valediction for a man who can safely be described as the father of the Silk Road:

'...for the first time relations were established between the lands of the northwest and the Han. It was Zhang Qian, however, who opened the way for this move, and all the envoys who journeyed to the lands in later times relied upon his reputation to gain them a hearing.'

A charming vignette about Emperor Wudi reveals that his long reign was not wholly devoted to military adventures. Wudi's mausoleum at Maoling, 40 km west of Xian, is the largest of all the Western Han tombs and is said to have taken fifty-three years to build. The attendant tombs contain the remains of important officials such as General Huo Qubing (see below). Nearby is the tomb of his favourite concubine,

Lady Li, an honour denied even to his two wives. She was a sister of the musician Li Yannian, who presented her to Wudi with a poem:

*'There's a beauty in the north
Who stands alone in the world.
A smile from her would cause the fall of a city;
Another smile would ruin a country.
What do you care about the downfall of a city or a country?
A beautiful lady would be hard to meet again!'*

(Quoted in He Zhenghuang, 1990)

A story from the time suggests that their love endured even after their deaths: whenever the moon rose, a thin thread of smoke would rise from Lady Li's tomb, circle round the mausoleum of Wudi and then disappear.

The long series of military campaigns that Wudi had begun in about 129 BC resulted in the gradual subjugation of the Xiongnu. One of Wudi's most celebrated and successful generals was Huo Qubing (140–117 BC), an acquaintance of Zhang Qian. Huo's mausoleum is adjacent

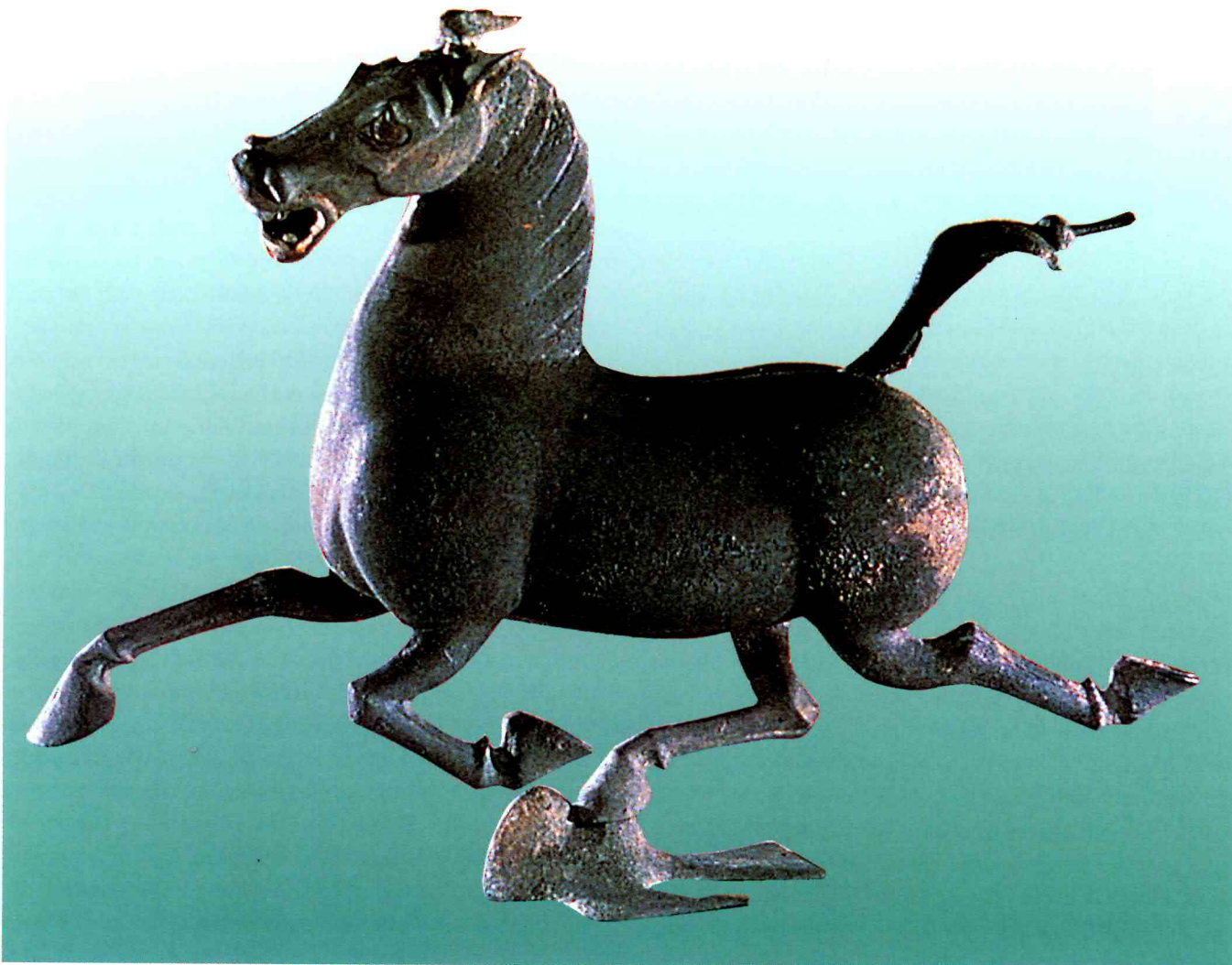
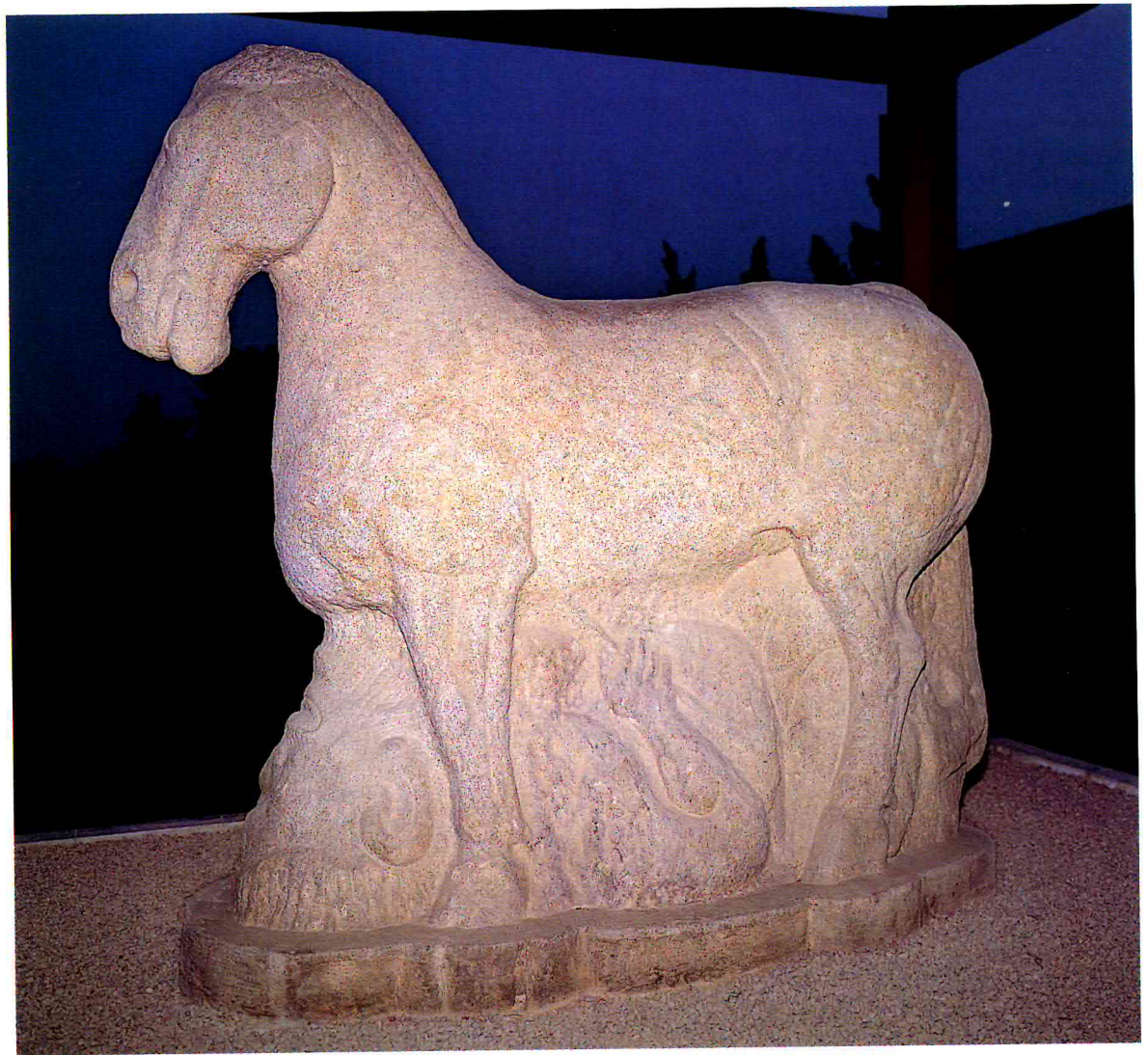


Fig. 14 Bronze spearhead with hanging men
Western Han dynasty
(206 BC – 9 AD)
H. 41.5 cm
Found in 1956 at Shizhaishan,
Jinning county, Yunnan province
(Yunnan Provincial Museum, Kunming)

Fig. 13 Bronze figure of a flying horse, one leg resting upon a swallow
Eastern Han dynasty
(25–220 AD)
H. 34.5 cm, L. 45 cm
Unearthed at Leitai, Wuwei,
Gansu in 1969
(Gansu Provincial Museum, Lanzhou)

Fig. 15 **Stone sculpture of a horse crushing a Xiongnu warrior**
 Western Han dynasty, 117 BC
 H. 168 cm, L. 190 cm
 From the tomb of General Huo Qubing (140–117 BC), Maoling, Shaanxi province
 The statues presiding over Huo Qubing's tomb are generally accepted as being the earliest stone sculptures in Chinese art.



to Wudi's and is presided over by spectacular life-size stone sculptures of horses, one of which tramples a Xiongnu warrior (fig. 15).

Huo Qubing was a gifted military strategist who was given command of his first army at the age of only eighteen. He was victorious in six consecutive campaigns against the Xiongnu and was honoured by Wudi who named him the 'swift Cavalry General. Sima Qian describes him as 'a man of few words...but...[that] he possessed great daring and initiative'. He is also described as having declined the Emperor's offer of a mansion, remarking that: 'While the Xiongnu have still not been wiped out there is no time to think about houses.' Another episode involving Huo occurred in 121 BC, when he led a force of 10,000 cavalrymen from Longxi in Gansu, about 500 km beyond Mt Yanzhi, to engage the Xiongnu. He killed or captured 18,000 of the Huns but, more significantly perhaps, is described by Sima Qian as having succeeded in defeating the Xiutu king – whose kingdom lay in the western part of Xiongnu territory – and 'seizing the golden man which he used in worshipping Heaven'. There has been considerable speculation among

scholars that this incident marked China's first contact with Buddhism (see p. 36).

When Huo died in 117 BC at the age of only twenty-four, Wudi ordered that soldiers from the defeated Xiongnu tribes line the road to his mausoleum. His grave mound was constructed in the shape of the Qilian Mountains of Gansu, where many of his greatest victories had occurred.

The gradual reduction in the threat from the Xiongnu facilitated greater contacts with the lands to the west. It was not all plain sailing, however. By about 111 BC it seems that Emperor Wudi's desire for horses had exceeded the appetite of his neighbours for the goods he was offering in exchange. Returning emissaries had informed him that the horses of Ershi (Sutrishna), capital of the Dayuan region between Khujand (Khodjent) and Samarkand, were the most magnificent of all the Ferghana steeds. He sent a gift of a thousand gold coins and a golden horse and a request for some of the Ershi mounts. But Dayuan, by this time, 'was overflowing with Han goods' and the King felt sufficiently removed from Chinese influence to refuse to supply them. The incensed Han envoy smashed the golden horse and

departed for Dayuan's eastern border. He and his party were overtaken, however, by agents of the king from the town of Yucheng and massacred.

Emperor Wudi was enraged by the murder of his envoys and dispatched Li Guangli, a second brother of his favourite concubine Lady Li, to exact revenge. In 104 BC, Li Guangli set off at the head of a force of 6,000 cavalry and 20,000 to 30,000 conscripts. As the army travelled west, the terrified occupants of the towns along the route barricaded themselves in and refused to supply provisions. By the time Li Guangli reached Yucheng he had lost all but a few thousand of his men and even they were exhausted. General Li attacked Yucheng but was beaten back and lost yet more men. He withdrew to Dunhuang, sending a message to Wudi to request permission to disband the army until reinforcements became available. Permission was refused and the troops were instructed to remain outside the Jade Gate (Yumenguan), China's western frontier. After some delay, a vast army of 60,000 men, 100,000 oxen and more than 30,000 horses was assembled and marched to Ershi with General Li in command. The town's water supply was diverted by the Chinese and after a siege of forty days it was on the verge of falling. Its occupants sought terms with the Chinese, who killed the king and yielded twenty or thirty of best horses as well as over 3,000 ordinary stallions and mares. Li Guangli's two campaigns had lasted four years and he acquired only a small number of 'heavenly horses.' But as he marched triumphantly back towards China the rulers of the small states he encountered on the way, having heard of the defeat of the Dayuan kingdom, swore loyalty to the Han and sent tribute to the court at Changan. This process enabled China to impose suzerainty on the entire Tarim Basin, thereafter known as Xinjiang ('New Dominion'). At about the same time, commanderies were established at Zhangye, Jiuquan, Dunhuang and Wuwei and a line of defensive fortifications built to protect the new routes to the West. This process of consolidation was completed by the formidable General Ban Chao (31–103 AD) who progressively subdued all of the kingdoms of the Tarim Basin and opened up the routes to the West (see p. 83).

A postscript to the story of China's perennial foe, the Xiongnu, was that their fortunes continued to decline long after the death of General Huo Qubing. In about 57 BC, riven by internal disputes, the Xiongnu Empire split into northern and southern factions. Following the death of the Northern Xiongnu ruler in 36 BC and a treaty agreed with the Southern leader, Huhanye, a long period of relative calm was achieved. Huhanye was presented with a Chinese concubine for a wife and was also paid generous annual tribute: the ensuing peace lasted well into the first century AD. By the end of that century the Xiongnu were thoroughly defeated and the remnants of their empire fled west into Central Asia or were transformed into fragmented, heavily

sinocized communities in Gansu and Shaanxi. There they engaged in raising cattle and horses and were also recruited as mercenaries to fight for whichever Chinese ruler happened to hold power. The Xianbei (Toba) tribes were similarly occupied in parts of Hebei and Liaoning and both groups were subjected to discrimination and oppression by the Chinese. At the beginning of the fourth century, the nomads rose against their rulers and proclaimed independent kingdoms in northern China: the Xiongnu proclaimed independence in 304, first calling their new state the Han and later the Zhou (names taken from great Chinese dynasties). With their equestrian and archery skills, the Xiongnu proved unstoppable and, by 316, they had captured both Luoyang and Changan (Xian). There followed a period of civil war lasting nearly 150 years, in which various nomadic groups fought each other to create as many as sixteen different states, each as ephemeral as its predecessor. An enormous southward exodus of Chinese occurred and the country was effectively divided in two: the north was controlled by the nomads and the south by the Han. At the end of the fourth century the Toba (Xianbei) emerged as the most powerful force in North China and, in 386, established the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534) with their capital at Datong (see p. 69).

The Xiongnu were never again regarded as a serious and unified threat although another branch of the tribe – how distant a branch is hotly disputed – appears, also during the fourth century, on the southern plains of Eastern Europe. Contemporary accounts of the Huns leave little doubt that Europeans feared them as much as the Chinese feared the Xiongnu:

'Lo, suddenly messengers ran to and fro and the whole East trembled, for swarms of Huns had broken forth from the far distant Maeotis between the icy Tanais and the monstrous peoples of the Massagetae, where the Gates of Alexander pen in the wild nations behind the rocks of the Caucasus. They filled the whole earth with slaughter and panic alike as they flitted hither and thither on their swift horses... May Jesus avert such beasts from the Roman world in the future!'

(St Jerome, quoted in Sinor, 1990)

After the defeat of the Alani and the Goths, an immense confederation of Huns was created under the command of Attila, 'the scourge of God'. By 452 Attila had conquered Gaul and northern Italy but died unexpectedly of excessive feasting in 453. At his funeral, the Inner Asian traditions of the Huns were not forgotten: they slashed at their faces as a sign of mourning and raced horses around the coffin. After Attila's death the Hun tribes disintegrated and its members were eventually dispersed and absorbed into local populations.